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Review: *The Night I Danced with Maya* by Colin Will

Mish (Eileen) Murphy · Tuesday, July 10th, 2018

The Night I Danced With Maya

by Colin Will

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*slippery oysters, lemon-tanged,
breast of happy duckling,
dawn-cut asparagus, firm yet tender,
drenched in admiring butter*

(“What shall I bring you?” p. 19)

I feel “drenched in admiring butter” myself as I write about Colin Will’s new collection of poetry, *The Night I Danced with Maya*. Lately, due to my hectic life, I have been guilty of neglecting to stop and look out the window to appreciate the sky. To make an attempt at changing my mood and focus, I took my copy of *The Night I Danced with Maya* with me in my purse and read it whenever and wherever I could—for example, I dipped into it in between classes at the college where I teach. I also read it while I waited at Urgent Care to get my arm x-rayed and stitched after I took a fall—thankfully, the book kept my attention. And after grading a clutch of college students’ final research essays, I found there was nothing better than diving into this book, which pleasantly engaged me.

The Night I Danced with Maya is not a “themed” poetry collection. However, the poems flow seamlessly, forming a cohesive whole held together by the speaker’s intelligent, empathetic voice. This means the reader is treated to a greater variety of poems than the ones in the usual themed

collection. Some no-theme poetry collections are disappointing, lacking viewpoint, pace, or even direction. On the other hand, reading a good un-themed collection of poems like this can feel liberating. This book is written by an experienced poet who uses whatever topic or form or length of poem or technique that's needed for a particular poem. Mostly, Will's poems are short, but a few of them do spread onto a second page. The poems are free verse, with notable exceptions such as when he shows us he has mastered the sonnet ("The Martian Sonnets" p. 68), haibun ("Plunging: a haibun" p. 22) and other traditional Japanese forms ("Thomas Glover's Nagasaki, a journey in Japanese forms" p. 78).

Colin Will, bard from Scotland

Colin Will, age 75, poet and publisher, is one of the leading poets of Scotland. The speaker in these poems seems to be the same person as the poet, who makes no attempt to refute the presumption that these poems are about his own life. The poet/speaker finds his advanced age only enhances his pleasure in life, and he seeks to convey that zest for life to others.

Will describes himself as "a hermit crab in a busy rockpool" ("Incomer" p. 36). Since 1996, he's published ten books of poetry, not counting the current volume. He also has a book of short stories forthcoming this year. An accomplished musician, he plays the soprano, alto, and tenor saxes, clarinet, and bass clarinet. He has chaired the board of StAnza, Scotland's International Poetry Festival and at present, he's on the team behind Dunbar [Scotland]'s CoastWord Festival. He publishes and edits a literary 'zine called *The Open Mouse*, which unfortunately, he's going to close down in summer 2018. But as busy as he's been, in these poems Will still finds the time to appreciate the big and small instants that make up our lives, to "sew together the paper pattern of words" ("Tailors and writers" p. 9).

Poems are inspiring, honest, and magic

I found all of the poems in *The Night I Danced with Maya* inspiring. These poems are successful largely due to the poet's careful selection of interesting moments to write about, and also due to the poet's humble honesty, which is a key part of his voice and gift.

The title poem is typical of Colin Will's particular brand of magic. In "The Night I Danced with Maya," the "Maya" in question is filmmaker Maya Deren, who asks the speaker to dance with her "to some melancholy juke jazz from Dizz or Bird" (p. 11). During their slow-dance, the speaker says, "My fingers noticed the sweet distance / between her dress and the skin of her back. // It didn't, couldn't last" (p. 11). As is typical of this speaker, he succeeds in "living in the now" and in conveying the essence of that "now" moment to the reader.

Similarly, in "Joanne," the speaker celebrates a moment when he is drawn to a stranger, a hotel waitress, an event which, at the advanced age of the speaker, serves as welcome indication that he can still feel that attraction: "[G]ood to know at seventy plus / desire can still be kindled...." (p.14). As the speaker comments in "Cliff path," "the novelty of attraction, / and its unexpected strength, / recalls feelings long forgotten" (p. 24).

The speaker-poet stops to appreciate the moment

We find out that this speaker is the kind of person who arrives at an appointment late because he "stopped to look out of the window / where the new pink buds on / the ornamental apple are starting to appear" ("I'm late" p. 34). In the poem "Observation," there is again a notable moment:

*By the time I stammered
 "I've just seen a whale,"
 it had gone, sounded.
 The other passengers
 doubted my eyesight, and
 for a while, I did too*

(p. 33).

Colin Will's *The Night I Danced with Maya* is a poetry collection that even the busiest of readers will find enjoyable and worthwhile. Whether read on-the-go or pored over at home, this book reminds us of what's important. Perhaps it is "a gray boulder sitting in the grass / like a permanent sheep surprised into immobility. // ...concentrating on what matters to her" ("Feral" p. 64). Perhaps it is the circle of life, "[a]nd whether we slide, walk, spin / or pray, the circles that we move in / have no beginning, and no end" ("Kumbun Monastery" p. 74).

Will writes, "Every hill different, each day / surprises, and the greatest / that you are here to know it" ("Topping" p. 48). We readers enjoy the poetry he pens as a result, described as "...row after row / of beautiful good green words" ("After Seamus" p. 49).

My response to *The Night I Danced with Maya* by Colin Will is this: Dear poet, please continue to take us with you as you climb those hills. We'll hold your hand. And we'll listen.

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